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THE MUSICAL TIMES,

And Singing Class Circular.

MARCH 1st, 1849.

NOTICE.

Our present Number contains a new Anthem appropriate to the season of Easter. We have to thank the Composer for the presentation of this Anthem, and for the ready way in which he has enabled us to meet the wishes of those Correspondents who suggested the insertion of an Easter Anthem, and its early appearance, to afford time for the requisite rehearsal. We trust they will find their wishes satisfactorily fulfilled.

MENDELSSOHN'S "LOBGESANG."

From the "Times."

Mendelssohn was the first to conceive the idea of applying the highest form of instrumental composition to the ends of religious worship. His *Sinfonia Religiosa*, written about twelve years before his death, for one of the great German festivals—a work that has never been heard in this country, and still remains in manuscript—was the earliest realization of this idea, subsequently developed to perfection in the *Lobgesang*, the admirable performance of which at Exeter Hall is another step towards the goal of excellence which the Sacred Harmonic Society is rapidly approaching, under the guidance of its new conductor, Mr. Costa. The *Lobgesang*, or *Hymn of Praise*, is one of the most ambitious and profound of Mendelssohn's productions. In it art has made all its strength and beauty subservient to the noblest purpose; it has lifted up its voice to magnify in strains of sublime melody the power and glory of the Creator. All the musician's resources are brought to bear: the grand symphonic form goes hand in hand with the magnificent harmony of the choir towards the attainment of this common object. No historical incidents, no hints for the manifestation of descriptive genius, no story, in short, suggest, as in the oratorio, variety of effect and contrast to the composer, who has but one theme to inspire him—praise to the Highest—and who must draw solely from the fountains of the heart and brain for the material to demonstrate it worthily. How worthily Mendelssohn has fulfilled his task the

vast crowd that listened attentively on Friday night can amply testify.

To criticise the *Lobgesang* in detail would exceed the limits we can afford; nor is it necessary, since it is above criticism; but, being one of the least intimately known, as well as one of the greatest of the works of Mendelssohn, a few remarks may not be unacceptable. The mere plan, independent of the exclusive tendency of this composition, is not entirely new. The universal Beethoven, in his musical illustration of Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, originated the notion of substituting a succession of choral movements and vocal solos for the usual symphonic *finale*. The ninth, and last, symphony of the author of *Fidelio* must, therefore, be acknowledged as the point from which Mendelssohn started. But there is one remarkable difference to be noted in the construction of the two works. In Beethoven's the three instrumental movements, which stand among the loftiest achievements of his genius, constitute by far the most important portion of the symphony; the vocal *finale* is simple, and even light, in comparison; in the *Lobgesang*, on the contrary, although the orchestral movements are perhaps more elaborate than those of Mendelssohn's great predecessor, the *finale*, which comprises the vocal part, is longer, grander, and more deeply coloured than all that precedes it. Thus, while Beethoven began, Mendelssohn ended with his full strength; the one relaxed as he went on, the other gradually heightened the interest until he reached the most elevated point at the climax. It is for this reason, and for its consequently greater unity of purpose and equality of style, that, with deference, we are compelled to own our preference for the *Lobgesang* over the remarkable work to which its peculiar form is undeniably to be traced. But Mendelssohn had in his favor the higher sublimity of his theme; the restless passion of joy which Beethoven has illustrated with such gigantic power is still 'of earth, earthy,' while the aspirations of the *Hymn of Praise* are of that purely spiritual nature which raises man above himself, and makes his thoughts sublime; both, it is true, are masterpieces, but the one is the expression of a human, the other of a divine feeling.

The three instrumental movements which

preface the *Lobgesang* are intended to suggest by musical expression an endeavour to acquire the state of mind necessary to enter with faith and zeal into the solemn task of praise. The first *allegro*, the longest instrumental movement ever written, is introduced by a short *chorale* of Luther's, which Mendelssohn imposingly gives out, in unison, on the trombones; it is then presented in full harmony, and afterwards appears in the *allegro*, throughout the whole of which is worked with consummate skill, entering *fortissimo* at the end of a long *crescendo*, accompanied by florid passages for the stringed instruments, and subsequently making itself evident in all sorts of unprepared and unexpected manners, but invariably with majestic effect. The meaning of the composer in introducing this *chorale* in so many shapes is almost self-evident; it is the voice of the good angel that, from time to time, encourages wavering humanity, and bids it be strong in faith; an interpretation strengthened, if not confirmed, by the movement into which the *allegro*, without finishing, leads—the *agitato* in G minor, one of the most passionate streams of melody that ever flowed from the pen of Mendelssohn. The *agitato* suggests a despondent and melancholy condition of mind, which is interrupted, in the second part, by the *chorale* arriving in a new form, and, as it were, struggling to make itself heard. The manner in which this combination, or rather combat between the physical and spiritual part of man's nature, is effected, must be regarded as a triumph of ingenuity, even for Mendelssohn, of all composers the most ingenious; the *chorale* and the *agitato* continually interrupt each other, so that only snatches of either can be heard, while both are supposed to be going on together; the instrumentation is masterly, the contrast of the brass and wood instruments, to which the phrases of the *chorale* are allotted, with the wailing tones of the violins and violoncellos, being quite indescribable; nor is the notion of alternating the major and minor keys between the *chorale* and *agitato*, so plainly marking the opposition between faith and despondency, less poetical in conception or less admirable in accomplishment. The *Adagio Religioso*, perhaps the most beautiful slow movement ever written by Mendelssohn, is one continuous expression of divine repose, and completely asserts the triumph of religion, and the establishment of that state of mind indispensable to sincere and ardent devotion. With this the instrumental part concludes. What follows is a series of vocal movements—choruses, duets, and solos—the words of which are selected from various passages in Scripture appropriate to the subject. This comprises an impressive chorus in two parts, 'All men, all things that live and breathe, sing to the Lord,' in which the *chorale*, now victorious, has a very prominent part; a *soprano* solo, intermingled with chorus in the

same key, 'Praise thou the Lord;' a recitative and air for tenor, 'He counteth all your sorrows,' a melody of exquisite tenderness, followed by a chorus in the same key, 'all ye that cried unto the Lord,' an intenser expression of the same idea; a duet for sopranos, 'I waited for the Lord,' in which Mendelssohn has almost surpassed himself in a peculiar combination of solo voices with chorus that he may be said to have made his own; a tenor solo, 'The sorrows of Death,' which leads to the culminating point of the *Lobgesang*, the tenor recitatives embodying the interrogations and responses of the watchmen, 'Watchman, will the night soon pass? &c. (a familiar passage in Scripture), and the tremendous chorus, 'The night is departing—the day is approaching,' which, for grandeur and magnificence, is not excelled by any known composition; a *chorale*, in seven-part harmony, 'Let all men praise the Lord,' without instrumental accompaniments, afterwards fully developed in a noble chorus, in which the whole power of the orchestra is called into play, while the *chorale* is sung in unison, with an effect quite overpowering; a duet for tenor and soprano, 'My song shall be always thy mercy,' of a purely devotional character; and lastly, another grand chorus in two parts, 'Ye nations, offer to the Lord,' which terminates with a masterly and splendid fugue, in the original key, on the words, 'Sing ye the Lord,' which gathers force and interest until it is interrupted by the re-appearance of the *chorale*, given out in unison by the trombones, as in the first instrumental movement, with a fragment of which, from the entire body of chorus and orchestra, the *Lobgesang* concludes, in a manner equally unaffected and sublime.

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From the LONDON JOURNAL.

PERHAPS one cause for the decadence of the drama, about which so many complaints have been and are daily being made, may be found in the extraordinary march music has made in England of late years. Within the last fourteen or fifteen years, music has made greater strides, both as a science and a popular recreation, than it had made, till then, from even as far back as the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Public taste is now decidedly in favor of music in dramatic entertainments. A good opera, generally speaking, outruns a good comedy; and, perhaps, the reason may be, because there is nothing in the latter which may not be drank in at one sitting, and few persons care about hearing a comedy a second time, whereas the case is the reverse with an opera. Music, however light, claims more than one hearing. The ear, though more sensitive, is not so discriminative in tune as in language. Every-day words and homely phrases are naturally more appreciable than sounds, complex or simple. Melody and harmony are more evanescent than dialogue or reciprocation of jest. In comedy, the mind is satisfied, and at once: in music, it is broken and tantalised. Most people can competently adjudicate on a play at one trial; but very few could decide on the merits of an opera until after frequent repetitions.